

George Plumptre, *The Fast Set: The World of Edwardian Racing*. Andrae Deutsch, London, 1985. pp. 176. £12.95.

Essentially this is a book about the personalities who, by virtue of the correct choice of parents, had both the wealth and the social position to influence the course of racing in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain. Indeed the author, a -freelance writer and journalist, gives pride of place to the Prince of Wales whom, it is claimed, by virtue of 'his popularity and successes did more to enhance the prestige and social acceptability of racing than any other single factor'. Yet this is no sycophantic account of sport and high society: the pen portraits, though occasionally accepting prejudiced contemporary opinion too readily, are well drawn and display the warts as well as the beauty spots. It becomes clear that behind the facade of respectability there was a good deal of immorality both in racing and amongst Britain's social set.

Serious sports historians may well find fault with the book. The absence of notes undermines the academic integrity of the work, though the author generally does identify the individuals whom he quotes. Anecdotal evidence is used, especially in quantitative matters such as the size of bets and presents to winning jockeys. Assertions are made without sufficient supporting evidence; in particular a claim that certain racing and society scandals 'had a disastrous effect on racing' appears contrary to most of the material presented elsewhere in the book. Improvements in the conduct of racing are overstated by exaggerating the degree of corruption in the immediate pre-Edwardian period and the claim of an increased

social role for racing is weakened by as failure to specify fully its place in the social calendar of earlier years.

Despite these criticisms, sports historians should still look at this entertaining book. Although most of the material is a thematic rearrangement of information in other works, there is a major original contribution in the form of a splendid collection of contemporary photographs which capture the atmosphere of Edwardian racing. This material is not merely ornamental but, thanks to detailed annotation, is of utility: the wealth of the leading patrons of the turf is readily apparent from the pictures of their estates and the social role of racing is easily appreciated from the illustrations of house parties and race meetings. It should be emphasised that this is not a chronicle of racing highlights and the author does attempt to consider racing in its social setting. For example, he points out the wide disparity of wealth associated with racing: at one end of the spectrum was Lord Lonsdale with his disposable income of \$4,000 a week (over £250,000 in current terms) while at the other were the Newmarket stable lads, many of whom worked long hours simply for their keep.

Wray Vamplew
Economic History Discipline
Flinders University